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California Postsecondary Education Commission

The Nexus Between Postsecondary Education and the Workforce: Next Steps

This report presents an update on a Commission study of the nexus between postsecondary education and the development of a world-class workforce for the 21st century.

Following a meeting with a technical advisory committee, staff recommends that further work be done to clarify research questions prior to moving forward on the next phase of the study.

The Commission advises the Governor and Legislature on higher education policy and fiscal issues. Its primary focus is to ensure that the state's educational resources are used effectively to provide Californians with postsecondary education opportunities. More information about the Commission is available at www.cpec.ca.gov.

Commission Report OP/05-03

Introduction

At its March meeting, the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) heard a report from staff that outlined an incremental approach to exploring the nexus between postsecondary education and the workforce. The report indicated that a technical advisory committee (TAC) was being formed to assist the staff in pursuing this work. The report also recommended that the focus of the initial policy document be the role of the bachelor's degree in workforce development. Work began on a draft document at the same time that prospective committee members were being recruited. That committee is still in formation, but as a result of its first meeting, staff is recommending the committee be more involved in shaping the entire project before focusing on any specific policy issues.

Technical advisory committee discussion

The TAC had its initial meeting on May 23, 2005. The initial group attending the meeting included representatives of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities (AICCU); a University of California representative was unable to attend. Also represented were the California Workforce Investment Board, the California Workforce Association, the Employment Development Department, the California Department of Education, and the California Department of Rehabilitation.

The intent of the meeting was to review and further develop a draft policy brief on the role of the bachelor's degree. After considerable discussion, the group concluded that more dialogue, research,

and—most importantly—clarification of the issues are needed before the paper moves ahead. The committee agreed to meet bi-monthly to help identify and confirm the direction to be taken for drafting policy briefs. The members also agreed to help identify additional stakeholders who should be recruited for the committee.

While the committee didn't feel comfortable advancing the draft policy brief, the meeting served to remind everyone of the breadth of the issue and the many perspectives held by various parties. It became clear that there was a need for more opportunities for dialog on the issues. It may be that this will be the only 2005 forum where that can happen, at least in the immediate future. AB 401 and SB 847—the only legislation aimed at creating a statewide policy forum involving workforce development and higher education—have both been amended and in their current form, neither bill addresses the issue. With such a large percentage of California's budget invested in K-20 education and workforce development (more than 60 percent, with \$12 billion in postsecondary public education alone), there is clearly a need to better understand education's role in workforce development.

CPEC staff and the technical advisory committee agreed that it was important to identify overarching questions that will serve as the framework for this study. Follow-up questions will be developed with input from the committee, taking into consideration the many perspectives brought to the table. Once there is greater clarity on the questions, Commission staff and the committee can more effectively provide analysis of the research as well as recommendations for policy.

The committee, working with staff, developed a list of potential questions that should be addressed regarding the overall study. It is the intent of the committee to meet following the June Commission meeting to further refine the questions and focus the next phase of work. Policy questions are as follows:

- Recognizing California as an economic leader in the nation and world, what are the elements/conditions that have contributed to its economic advantage?
- How does “college education” fit in?
- What is needed to support a high growth economy with a high quality of life?
- What are the social and economic needs of a complex society that evolves rapidly and needs to grow in order to remain competitive in the world?
- Are colleges and universities, particularly California's public postsecondary institutions, informed by, and responsive to, the demands of California's changing economy?
- What leads to a high growth economy?
- Is California educationally and economically competitive in the national and world markets?
- What is changing in the “condition of economic competitiveness”?
- What are the implications for California's economy and education system?
- What data are needed to answer these questions in a manner that will benefit state level policymakers, as well as the postsecondary segments, other educational institutions, state agencies, and the private sector?
- In understanding the nexus between postsecondary education and the workforce, what mechanism(s) should be employed that can accurately gauge this nexus in both an immediate and future sense?
- What are the common threads on which state agencies, the private sector, and education can come to consensus regarding the nexus between education and the workforce, or more specifically, postsecondary education's role?

- If California is to maintain its position as an economic leader in the 21st century, is there a need to improve dialogue between segments, state agencies and the private sector?
- How can that dialogue be achieved and sustained and where might it lead?

Once these questions are framed clearly, more specific research questions will emerge, such as:

- What are the demands of the labor market?
- How much education will be needed to meet current and future workforce demands?
- What are the economic impacts of four-year public and private institutions on the state?
- What is the economic impact of the California community college system on the state?
- What college programs are currently meeting workforce development needs?
- What fields are generating the greatest economic impact to the state?
- What role should higher education play in reducing the gap in job skill attainment?
- What emphasis should we place on access and equity? How should we look at it?
- What are we hoping to gain from this research?

Addressing these questions will be done in conjunction with, or prior to, moving on to the major questions CPEC staff will explore in the initial stages of this study, specifically related to the role of the bachelor's degree in workforce development. Specific questions pertaining to baccalaureate production include:

- What role and impact does obtaining a bachelor's degree have on individual communities and the state's workforce development?
- In the new "knowledge based" economy, is a bachelor's degree critical to achieving individual economic well being?
- Is an increase in the production of bachelor's degrees necessary to meet the demand for a trained and skilled workforce in this new economy? In what fields?
- What is the economic impact to the state of so-called "reverse transfer" students (post-baccalaureate students who return to community colleges for skills training)?

These questions will be explored from several perspectives, with the goal of determining the various roles of the state and its postsecondary educational institutions and workforce development agencies in meeting both the economic and educational needs of California.